

Sūrah Takāthur

Central Theme

Sūrah Takāthur forms a pair with Sūrah Qāri‘ah, the preceding *sūrah*. There is no essential difference between the topics discussed in the two. In Sūrah Qāri‘ah, it is pointed out that only the good deeds done in this world will be of any use to a person in the Hereafter; they only will have weight in the Balance of Justice. A person whose good deeds abound will attain salvation, while a person whose evil deeds outnumber the good ones, however much a treasure he might have amassed, will be doomed forever. Grief and regret will be his only companions.

In this *sūrah*, people who have confined all their efforts to achieve worldly gains, and whose aim in life has remained nothing but to outdo one another in the acquisition of wealth, are warned of the dreadful fate which awaits them. They are the ones who spent their lives in the lust and greed for money, and always remained possessed with an insatiable desire to accumulate the luxuries and riches of this world. Throughout their lives, they remained so occupied with this dash for wealth that they forgot the Day when they would be held accountable for all their deeds. A day wherein they would be flung into the raging fire of hell, if they would fail to justify their deeds. They would be inquired about everything they had acquired, the manner in which it was acquired, and the way it was expended and consumed. They would be questioned about how they used their abilities, skills and other blessings given to them by the Almighty; whether they used them to please Him or employed them to satisfy their own lusts and gratify Satan.

Meaning of the Sūrah

أَلْهَاكُمْ السَّكَائِرُ (١) حَتَّى زُرْتُمُ الْمَقَابِرَ (٢) كَلَّا سَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ (٣) ثُمَّ كَلَّا سَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ (٤) كَلَّا لَوْ تَعْلَمُونَ عِلْمَ الْيَقِينِ (٥) لَتَرَوُنَّ الْجَحِيمَ (٦) ثُمَّ لَتَرَوُنَّهَا عَيْنَ الْيَقِينِ (٧) ثُمَّ لَتَسْأَلَنَّ يَوْمَئِذٍ عَنِ النَّعِيمِ (٨)

The desire to surpass one another in the acquisition of wealth has allured you until you reached the graves. By no means! you will soon come to know! Yes, By no means! you will soon come to know! (1-4)

By no means! if you knew with certainty that you would surely come

across Hell, and you would observe it by your very eyes, and you would be questioned about these favours, then ...(5-8)

Explanation of the Sūrah

أَلْهَاكُمْ التَّكَاثُرُ¹

أَلْهَا means “to allure” and “to deceive”.

تَكَاثُرٌ means “abundance in wealth and children”.

According to the custom in the pre-Islamic Arab society, a family was responsible for the defence and security of a tribe. Due to this reason, the family which had the largest number of individuals was entrusted with this task. This naturally resulted in a race to outdo one other not only in the accretion of wealth, but also in the size of a family. Anyone who has studied their customs and traditions knows that they used to take a lot of pride in not only outdoing one another in wealth but also in having a large family. In present times, with the change in the social set up, this situation has also changed. Specially, due to the widely acclaimed concept of family-planning, the general trend is to raise the standard of living by having as small a family as possible. Almost all people seem to be afflicted with this malady, and one seldom comes across anyone who has not been a prey to this contagious disease. Also, since no upper limit has been fixed in the standard of living, their thirst for wealth never quenches, and in fact every bit gathered makes them yearn for more. They have been caught in a vicious circle, and there seems no end to this race for material gains. As no limit has been set for the standard of living, the rate at which their greed is continuing to increase, is much more than the rate at which the standard of living itself is increasing. It is this which the Qur’ān terms as تَكَاثُرٌ, and asserts that it effectively allures a person to the extent that he becomes unmindful to the other important realities of life. He is so overcome by the desire to acquire worldly riches that he becomes totally indifferent to the life that awaits him in the Hereafter.

حَتَّىٰ زُرْتُمُ الْمَقَابِرَ²

This means that their whole life is spent in the acquisition of wealth and material benefits, till the final resting place is encountered. In Arabic, the verbal noun, زَيَّارَت, from which the word زُرْتُم is derived, simply means “to see”, contrary to its connotation in Urdu, where a certain amount of holiness and sanctity is also attached to this meaning.

1. The desire to surpass one other in the acquisition of wealth has allured you.

2. Until you reached the graves.

Hence, زُرْتُمْ means: “you saw the graves” that is ‘you were consigned to the graves’. To quote a Ḥamāsī poet:

إذا زرت أرضاً بعد طول إجتناها
فقدت صديقي و البلاد كما هيا

(When I see my place years after remaining away from it, it seems as if I have lost all my friends, but the place is the same as it was before.)

Although there was an Arabic tradition, according to which the Arabs used to keep an account of the graves of their people and proudly mentioned them in their gatherings, but this is not implied here. But, indeed one wonders why the expression حَتَّى زُرْتُمُ الْمَقَابِرَ has been used by the Qur’ān, instead of simply saying “until death overtook you”. In my opinion, the reason behind adopting this particular style is firstly, to maintain the rhyme of the verses and secondly, to express regret and pity over the unfortunate people, who have deprived themselves of the reward in the Hereafter by indulging in a relentless race for wealth.

كَلَّا سَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ (٣) ثُمَّ كَلَّا سَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ (٤)³

This serves as a forceful intimation to those who consider material success in life all that one must strive for. It sounds a warning to those who after being explained everything, are not willing to open their eyes to the actual reality. It cautions them that this life whose charms have allured them so much is not the end. In fact, the life in the Hereafter which at the moment is invisible to them is the life for which they must really strive for, which very soon they will behold from their very eyes.

The double stress in these verses is to make this warning more efficacious, as well as to express the fact that a nation which rejects and denies the message of a prophet directly assigned towards them, faces severe punishment not only in this world, but also in the next. In other words, it admonishes them to either mend their ways or get ready to face this double humiliation – for a decision about their fate is about to be made.

The threat hidden beneath the word تَعْلَمُونَ (you will come to know) is too evident to be described in words.

3. By no means! you will soon come to know. Yes, By no means! you will soon come to know.

كَلَّا لَوْ تَعْلَمُونَ عِلْمَ الْيَقِينِ (٥) لَتَرَوُنَّ الْجَحِيمَ (٦) ثُمَّ لَتَرَوْهَا عَيْنَ الْيَقِينِ (٧) ثُمَّ
لَتُسْأَلُنَّ يَوْمَئِذٍ عَنِ النَّعِيمِ (٨)⁴

These verses unveil the real reason behind the carefree attitude of such people. It is attributed to their lack of belief in the Day of Judgement, a day in which they will observe the abyss of Hell from their very eyes. A day when they will be held answerable for all the favours and blessings the Almighty had showered upon them, and which they had squandered against His liking. If they had a true belief in the Day of Judgement, they would never have indulged in these material pursuits, and would have spent all their time and energies in preparing themselves for it.

It would be appropriate here to analyze the grammatical structure and construction of these verses. The apodosis (*jawāb*) of the hypothetical particle لَوْ is omitted here. Though almost all the commentators agree to this, but they do not consider the subsequent verses as subordinate to this conditional clause of the foremost verse. However, in my opinion the subsequent verses are also subordinate to the hypothetical particle لَوْ of the first verse, and they are not separate or independent sentences. The over all apodosis of لَوْ is omitted because the context readily suggests it. We can unfold the whole sentence as thus: "If you knew all these aspects, you would never have adopted this attitude." In grammatical terminology, the verse لَتَرَوُنَّ الْجَحِيمَ is in place of the object of the verse لَوْ تَعْلَمُونَ عِلْمَ الْيَقِينِ (if you knew with certainly that you would see the blazing fire of hell). The asseverative particle لَ, appended to the energetic verb لَتَرَوُنَّ is meant to emphasize this certainty.

It follows from this that the عِلْمُ الْيَقِينِ ('ilm al-yaqīn) or certain knowledge needed to have faith in the Day of Judgement is already present in the manifest verses of the Qur'ān, in our own intuition, as well as in every phenomenon of nature. As such, every person must accept and acclaim this reality. Anyone who evades it by paying no heed to these strong testimonies present inside and outside him, can have no excuse for this attitude, and strictly deserves to be punished.

Another evident conclusion is that though certain knowledge about realities which in this world have been concealed from our eyes can be obtained from the Qur'ān, and from the testimonies of the human instinct and the cosmic order, yet عَيْنُ الْيَقِينِ ('ayn al-yaqīn) or the certainty obtained by actually beholding a reality can only be possible in the

4. By no means! if you knew definitely that you would surely come across Hell, and you would observe it by your very eyes, and you would be questioned about these blessings, then...

Hereafter because this type of knowledge solely relates to the observation of the concealed realities. On these grounds, I consider as baseless, the claim of some people that عَيْنُ الْيَقِينِ ('ayn al-yaqīn) can be obtained in this world as well. Only عِلْمُ الْيَقِينِ ('ilm al-yaqīn) about a reality on the basis of external evidences can be obtained in this world, and which, of course, one day will be observed directly.

The last verse ثُمَّ لَتُسْأَلُنَّ يَوْمَئِذٍ عَنِ النَّعِيمِ also has a subordinate relation with the verse لَوْ تَعْلَمُونَ عِلْمَ الْيَقِينِ. A precise translation reads thus: if you knew that on that day you would be questioned about every favour and blessing. By this “questioning”, is actually meant that they would be punished for misusing these blessings, and for being ungrateful to the Almighty.

The word النَّعِيمِ encompasses all the skills and capabilities, as well as all means and resources God has blessed us with. All these privileges and favours necessitate that we should be grateful to God, and expend them in the way He has prescribed for us and within the limits set by Him. If these blessings are wasted or misused, then this negligence must necessarily be punished by the wrath of God. A person's eyes, ears, heart, brain, and indeed all his organs and limbs are a blessing of God. Similarly, all the latent and apparent skills and abilities that he has been blessed with, as well as all his means and resources are a gift of God. It is the natural right of these blessings that God should be thanked for this bestowal, and that they should be used within the limits prescribed by Him. At the same time, a person must not become so possessed with them that he actually starts worshipping them, forgetting the real Creator. Those who commit such excesses will be severely dealt with on the Day of Judgement.

Since in this *sūrah*, the evils of the acquisition of wealth are highlighted, wealth, which is one of the connotations of the word النَّعِيمِ is specially discussed here. Every person will be held accountable for the manner in which he had acquired his wealth, and the ways in which he had spent it. Those who had spent it against the liking of the Almighty, and did not care to acquire it by legitimate means, worshipping it by spending all their lives accumulating it will be confronted by the fate mentioned in Sūrah Humaza:

وَيْلٌ لِّكُلِّ هُمَزَةٍ لُّمَزَةٍ الَّذِي جَمَعَ مَالًا وَعَدَّدَهُ يَحْسَبُ أَنَّ مَالَهُ أَخْلَدَهُ كَلَّا لَيُنْبَذَنَّ فِي
الْخُطْمَةِ وَمَا أَذْرَاكَ مَا الْخُطْمَةُ نَارُ اللَّهِ الْمَوْقَدَةُ الَّتِي تَطْلُعُ عَلَى الْأَفْئِدَةِ إِنَّهَا عَلَيْهِمْ
مُؤَصَّدَةٌ (٨) فِي عَمَدٍ مُمَدَّدَةٍ (١٠٤: ١-٦)

Devastation to every slanderer, every person who makes evil gestures at others, and who amassed wealth and kept counting it, thinking that his wealth had rendered him immortal. By no means! He shall be flung into

that which crushes. And what do you imagine that which crushes is? A fire kindled by Allah; which will rise up to their hearts. Indeed, they will be enshrouded in it, fastened to columns very high. (104: 1-6)

At the end, the overall apodosis of the particle *لَوْ* is omitted, as has been indicated before. There are many places in the Qur'ān where this style is adopted because the omission is so obvious that it needs no words for its expression. This style very effectively conveys the intended meaning, which is in fact very comprehensive and whose expression might otherwise be against the norms of brevity, a distinctive feature of the Qur'ān.

In this case, the omitted part which is left to the imagination of the reader, is actually a final warning for these people. It is a means of urging them to calmly review all their hitherto policies. It cautions them to seriously analyze their attitude about some undeniable and inescapable realities of life. It exhorts them to deeply contemplate over the pattern of their lives and assess how far from reality they had always remained; how incorrect and unrealistic was their attitude about it. If they had earnestly thought about them, they would not have wasted their lives in oblivion. But then, all is not lost. They are being offered a final chance to mend their ways, and change their life styles. They should now confine all their efforts and undertakings to earn the eternal happiness of the Hereafter, instead of wasting them in material pursuits.

This whole meaning is being suggested by this omission – a perfect example of how effectively the Qur'ān uses brevity to conceal profound meanings in a minimum number of words.
